[Shi 'hou]

sheikh's name and address in Arabic, and a statement in the same language to the effect that the bearer had his permission to travel through Oman without let or hindrance. It also offered dire penalties, including the amputation of the right hand, to any who dared to show violence to the bearer. Unfolding this rather dirty piece of paper I handed it to the headman. He held it gingerly in his fingers, gazing at it suspiciously, and pretended to read it although it was upside down. With a shrug he then handed it to another tribesman, but this man could make nothing of the document either.

Although they could not understand Arabic script, I think they must have had some inkling of its meaning, for they began a violent altercation amongst themselves. One of them suddenly pointed in the direction of Ras-al-Khaimah, and then at us. Beginning to get rather tired of all this pantomime, I decided to take decisive measures. There is a rule in the desert, at least among the Bedouins, that if you are attacked you should seize the garment of the most respectable Arab and cry: '*Daheel*', which means 'protection'. Under the unwritten laws of Arab hospitality, he is obliged to keep you in safe custody for at least twenty-four hours. The principle is not unlike that obtaining in the Middle Ages, when the outlaw could enter a church and claim sanctuary from the clergy.

I had no idea how it would work with the *Shi'hou*, but I was determined to try. Dashing forward I seized the scanty hem of the headman's *kufiyeh* and yelled '*Daheel*' at the top of my voice. To my surprise the old man's face was suddenly contorted with fear, and he stepped back as though I had struck him a blow. His rapid action resulted in a piece of the rotten cloth coming away in my hands and he was left almost naked. The effect of his predicament on the other *Shi'hou* was astonishing. At first amazement, then amusement, was written on their faces. Some grinned widely, others burst into shrieks of laughter. Even the headman, who had covered up his bare limbs as best he could with a few shreds of cloth, was grinning sheepishly. All signs of hostility had vanished. With a gesture the headman beckoned us towards the hut from which the shrieking woman had emerged.

Closely followed by a still laughing bodyguard, we marched towards the hut. The headman entered first, directing us to follow him. It was dark and dirty inside as well as hot and foul-smelling. Our hosts squatted on the bare floor in a circle, which we joined.

228 earliest times the sheikhs have derived a considerable proportion of their incomes from profits of the pearl trade, it is in their interest to pool their efforts during the season and abstain from hostilities. 622 The only men who are not allowed to take part in pearling are the 703 sheikh's soldiers and guards, who are continually on duty, and are not allowed to leave their respective towns without permission. They are usually recruited from various tribes, never from a single tribe; so that there is little danger of disaffection or of combination against their employer.

Our own guards at the Fort, who numbered about forty men, were supplied by the Sheikh of Sharjah, but they were not natives of Oman. Known as Askharis, they originate from the hill districts of Muscat, and are noted for their fearlessness and toughness as fighters. They were a villainous-looking lot of ruffians, but I got to know them individually very well indeed, and liked them [522] immensely. They were always fond of a joke and had a broad sense of humour, even if it was sometimes childish. I could trust them implicitly, as they were possessed of a dog-like loyalty and would have laid down their lives for me. They were immensely proud of their responsibility in guarding the Fort, and were extremely hurt on one occasion when I asked Cranley to provide an R.A.F. guard for an aircraft which, owing to an engine change, had to be retained at Sharjah for the night. They considered that they should have been entrusted with the task, and sulked about it for days. The reason for my action was not distrust of the Askharis or their capabilities as guards, but the simple fact that according to our regulations a British military guard must be provided for aircraft.

They were paid rather badly by the sheikh, and in consequence were invariably on the cadge for food and items of discarded clothing. These requests were usually made through their leader, Khofan, a fine-looking old man with a silky white beard, who was a past master in the art of asking favours. He was so courteous and kindly that it was difficult to refuse him. One of his most persistent requests was that I should provide his men with a barousti hut outside the Fort, so that in wet or cold weather they would not have to make the journey to Sharjah. I should have liked to give him his hut, but unfortunately we had no labour or materials and the Public Works Department attached to the R.A.F. were far too busy with camp enlargements to be able to oblige me.

000 I have mentioned that tribal wars were largely due to a lack of